

Grandpa's Coffee

Dennis Smith

IT IS A MORNING FLIGHT. We have gained altitude and are somewhere over the Colorado Rockies. Below, through breaks in the clouds, a thin film of early snowfall covers the mountaintops like a veil. High mountain lakes, cupped in pockets, look black and cold in the early morning light, and the sound of the jet engines covers thinking.

I am alone in row 10, right behind the bulkhead, so there are no seats in front of me. A thin airline blanket warms my stocking feet. It is so peaceful after a hectic week of getting ready for this flight that I am very relaxed.

The stewardess bends toward me. Do I want some breakfast? Yes. A minute later she comes with orange juice, a baking powder biscuit, scrambled eggs, and sausage. Coffee?

A long, almost awkward pause.

Shocked at the sound of my own voice, I hear myself say yes. She pours the coffee into a styrofoam cup and hands it to me. The warm, brown coffee is steaming. Almost ritualistically, I set the coffee gently on the tray. She hands me a packet of sugar and a little plastic cup of creamer, a cup identical in size to the little sacrament cups in church.

Alone again (there is a man in a gray suit across the aisle, but he is absorbed in a book and three empty seats away), I carefully tear the sugar packet and pour the white granules in a thin stream into the steaming coffee. The cream pours from the little cup like white blood, coloring the coffee a lighter brown.

Something deep is welling up.

I stir the coffee with a red plastic stir stick, slowly. I lift it to my mouth, and the scent of Grandpa's coffee overwhelms me.

Grandpa's kitchen. I am across the table from him. Grandpa bows his head in a patterned little prayer, lifts his head, and begins to eat. On the stove to his left and behind him the coffee percolates, bubbling up into the little

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round glass knob at the top of the pot — the sound of it like bubbling water in a spring from deep in the earth.

Grandpa, I love you.

The scent of coffee from the styrofoam cup embraces me, and I am filled with an overwhelming sense of sorrow and loss. Grandpa's arms close over me. He lays my head against his tan, cotton shirt and begins to cry. I turn my head to the window, toward the sun-sprayed clouds below, and my whole upper body tightens with the deep ache you feel when everything breaks and the boards of the irrigation headgate are pulled away. The scent of Grandpa's coffee engulfs me. I drink deep and full, bringing Grandpa back into my consciousness, pulling him back into a comforting embrace to hold the hurt and cleanse it.

We are somewhere east of the Mississippi now. I think I heard the captain say something about St. Louis a little while ago — but I wasn't really listening. His voice was like that of someone in another room, and I was too preoccupied to notice exactly what was being said.

Emotionally, I am exhausted. I have not felt so exhausted — or so at peace — for a very long time. It is, in fact, a new feeling, this peacefulness. It is as if I have made a peace with myself in some odd sort of way, but no concessions have been necessary. Just gentle reconciliations. I would not have thought it could be so settling, this unexpected feeling of self-acceptance that comes with the beauty of cloud orchards as a backdrop, spread over an endless horizon, and the power of coffee, filling and purifying the reverent space of a retired farmer's kitchen no longer there.



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